

# Thinking Critically About Abortion

Why Most Abortions Aren't Wrong & Why All Abortions Should Be Legal

by Nathan Nobis & Kristina Grob, Open Philosophy Press, 2019

An Open Educational Resource

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Friday, November 13, 2020

## Fetal Alcohol Syndrome & Abortion: On The Impairment Argument by Perry Hendricks

There's an argument against abortion that says this:

- since it would be (and is) wrong to harm a fetus—say by a pregnant woman smoking (too much) or using certain drugs or drinking far too much alcohol [leading to [fetal alcohol syndrome](#)] or otherwise acting in ways that are dangerous to the fetus—abortion is also wrong; *or*,
- if it's wrong to do things that are damaging to a fetus (and it is), it's also wrong to damage a fetus by aborting it, especially since abortion is a greater "damage."

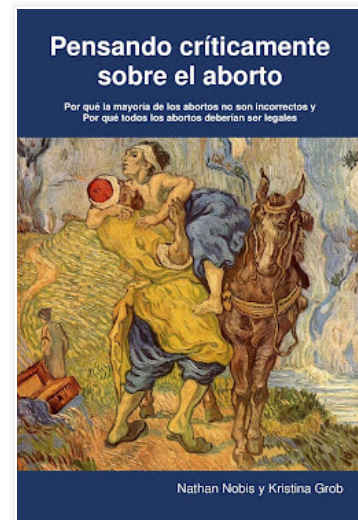
This argument has been dubbed the "[impairment argument](#)" against abortion and has gotten some development and defense in [philosophical journals](#).

While the argument might be new and might seem clever (maybe another "[zinger](#)"?), it at least seems that the argument just isn't good, for pretty simple and obvious reasons.

**Simply put, *why* is causing, say, fetal alcohol syndrome wrong? Why is someone knowingly and *avoidably* causing something like this blameworthy?**

The most obvious and straightforward answer is this:

Pensando críticamente sobre el aborto



Pensando críticamente sobre el aborto

Early and Later Abortions: Ethics and Law

- causing fetal alcohol syndrome (and other similar conditions) is wrong because it leads to a future person having a worse quality of life, **a more difficult life**, than they would have had if they had not had fetal alcohol syndrome: life would have been better *for them* if their mother did not do what she did.

Even more simply put, *why avoid fetal alcohol syndrome?* So your future child doesn't have medical problems and life difficulties that they wouldn't have, if they hadn't had fetal alcohol syndrome. It would be interesting to review what's medical professionals say for why fetal alcohol syndrome is bad and should be avoided: I'd bet what they say is very similar to this common-sense explanation.

**Now, does this explanation suggest anything about abortion? Does it suggest that abortion is wrong?**

No, not at all. It doesn't apply, since—by design—abortion results in there not being some future person, much less a future person with a lower quality of life than they would have had.

So the basic reason to be concerned about fetal alcohol syndrome just doesn't apply to abortion. So the argument doesn't appear to work, again, for pretty simple and obvious reasons. (This discussion here, however, does again suggest that "**bodily autonomy**" arguments *for* abortion have limits, since bodily autonomy wouldn't, say, justify knowingly doing what will lead to someone having fetal alcohol syndrome).

Of course, that doesn't mean that the conclusion is false or that there aren't better arguments for the same conclusion.

**But maybe the objection above is mistaken? Maybe the argument really is a good one? If so, how and why is that?**

### Basics about FASDs

Updated 12/20/18

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs) are a group of conditions that can occur in a person whose mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. These effects can include physical problems and problems with behavior and learning. Often, a person with an FASD has a mix of these problems.

#### Cause and Prevention


FASDs are caused by a woman drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Alcohol in the mother's blood passes to the baby through the umbilical cord.

There is no known safe amount of alcohol during pregnancy or when trying to get pregnant. There is also no safe time to drink during pregnancy. Alcohol can cause problems for a developing baby throughout pregnancy, including before a woman knows she's pregnant. All types of alcohol are equally harmful, including all wines and beer.

To prevent a child from having an FASD, a woman should not drink alcohol while she is pregnant, or might be pregnant. This is because a woman could get pregnant and not know for up to 4 to 6 weeks.

If a woman is drinking alcohol during pregnancy, it is never too late to stop drinking. Because brain growth takes place throughout pregnancy, the sooner a woman stops drinking the better it will be for her and her baby. Resources are available [here](#).

FASDs are preventable if a woman does not drink alcohol during pregnancy.



From <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/facts.html>

This discussion in video format:

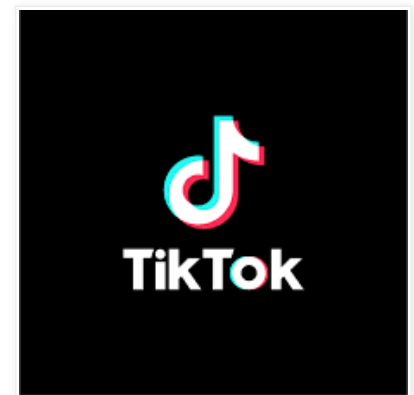


Early and Later Abortions: Ethics and Law

Youtube



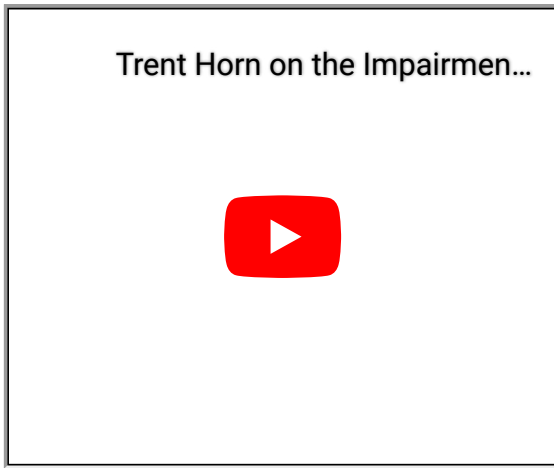
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Update: similar arguments are made here:

Cushing S. Why the wrongness of intentionally impairing children *in utero* does not imply the wrongness of abortion. *Journal of Medical Ethics* Published Online First: 05 September 2022. doi: 10.1136/jme-2022-108583

All other blog posts are available [here](#).

By Nathan Nobis



Labels: [impairment argument](#)

## 4 comments:

**Perry Hendricks** November 13, 2020 at 9:04 PM

Thanks for this, Nathan. I think the explanation you suggest doesn't work, since giving a fetus FAS is still wrong even if no future person exists. I address this concern in section 5.1.2 of my paper that you link - though, the defense is in need of updating!

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### Replies



**Nathan Nobis** November 14, 2020 at 8:16 AM

Thanks for your response, Perry!

First, it doesn't look like a fetus could be given FAS, strictly speaking, since the diagnoses are all conditions that a fetus couldn't really have:

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/facts.html>

But suggestion could be that that if someone \*damages\* a an embryo or fetus and then kills that embryo or fetus, so no future person arises, that's wrong, \*and so abortion is wrong.\*

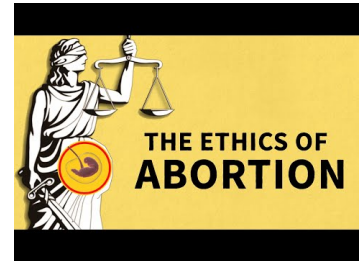
My quick reactions here are that

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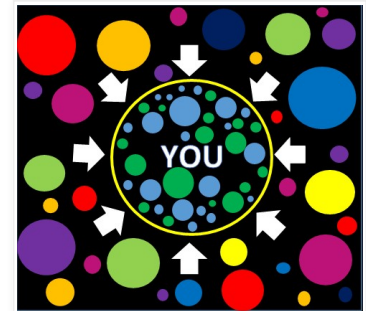
Many people like watching video presentations and so here are some Youtube videos . First, a 5-minute video presentation of my 1000-Word Ph...



Is your Opinion on Abortion Wrong? Critical Thinking & Abortion



Are you part of a cult about abortion, or anything else?



Are you part of a cult about abortion, or anything else?

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(a) doesn't this actively happen in embryo experimentation? And doesn't it happen in IVF (by allowing damage to eventually happen)? If so, insofar as people are OK with those (and, importantly, generally OK with abortion), then people aren't inclined to agree with the initial claim that it's wrong to damage embryos and fetuses, if no person comes from them.

(b) I suspect that most people would agree that it's wrong to damage embryos and fetuses, even if no person comes from them, only if they already believe that abortion is wrong, so I am concerned about the potential question-begging nature of this response;

(c) some people might respond that this type of case is just kinda weird and that their intuitions are cloudy and unreliable. They might be right;

(d) finally, I think some people would say that, whatever anyone's feelings here (and however they inaccurately "picture" the case in their mind, which contributes to distortions: e.g., someone might picture the case as a literal baby being damaged, not an embryo), "no harm, no foul" so this wouldn't be wrong.

OK, these are some quick thoughts here. Thanks!

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### Reply



**Jahzara** November 14, 2020 at 1:40 AM

Appreciate the responding to this new argument of theirs. I am left with the conclusion that it is likewise wrong for anti abortion proponents to put in place abortion bans as this also leads to a person having a worse quality of life than they would have if they had not been deprived of the option to abort. Quite possibly two people.

I would like to note, however, that I do not think that giving someone FAS is immoral. If you purposefully do so for the sole desire to give the future person FAS, then yes, it would be. But no one does that. Alcoholism is a disease. Birth defects can be a risk of many different diseases. If you have severe mental health issues and must be on a medication, it would not be immoral to remain on that medication even if it damaged someone else. If you have gastroparesis and have a difficult time getting proper nutrition, your child's poor health outcomes would not be something we consider immoral.

When we label drug usage or alcohol usage as wrong and the person faces potential criminal charges for it, they avoid prenatal appointments and it results in a worse outcome for both mother and baby. We need to do away with stigma on health issues.

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### Replies



**Nathan Nobis** November 14, 2020 at 7:47 AM

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This book introduces readers to the many arguments and controversies concerning

Thanks for your response. I think about your second concern, advocates of this argument might reply that \*even if\* people who have alcoholism don't do wrong here and aren't blameworthy, what happens is bad and unfortunate and that's enough for their argument to work. Or they might restrict it to (perhaps made-up) cases where someone were to intentionally do this to make their argument.

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Is the "bodily autonomy" argument for abortion \*that\* simple?

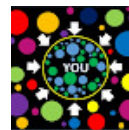
Some claim that the abortion issue is simple: the right to bodily autonomy justifies the (legal and moral) right to abortion, and that'...



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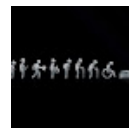
people??"

Hello Dr. Nobis, I was alerted to the existence of your book "Thinking Critically About Abortion" via the Crusade Against Ig...



Are you part of a cult about abortion, or anything else?

How people engage the issue of abortion can be indicative of general patterns of inquiry, thinking and communicating about controversial and...



"When does 'life' begin? Well, when does 'life' end?"

A common question that people ask in discussing abortion is this: "When does life begin?" A common answer is something like this:...


**tue signaling**

sometimes Disparaging a strategy of one's point of view on a lie to gain praise or acknowledge all point of view, or to possibly reduce or even signaling of nobody with the real or outgroup other signaling comes across

"Force birther"-ism and Virtue Signaling

There's seems to be an

increasingly popular "move" online of calling people who think abortion is wrong and should be illegal ...



[The Ambiguities of "Life" and "Human": Responding to Steve Jacobs at "Secular Pro-Life"](#)

Steve Jacobs responded at "Secular Pro-Life" to this post of mine that was critical of his dissertation project, and I think h...



[Star Trek: "Human rights. Why, the very name is racist."](#)

There's a scene from the 1991 film Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country, where one of the Klingon characters states, "Human ri...

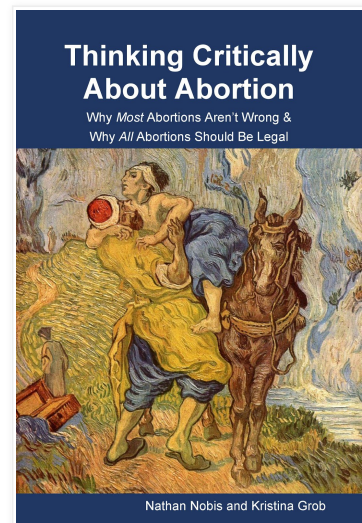
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